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# SOME ALLUSIONS TO RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL PLAYS

The use of the sixteenth-century stage in the interests of religion and politics has received recent treatments by Chambers,[1] Miss Gildersleeve,[2] and to a lesser degree, by De Rothschild.[3] Since allusions to performances of a controversial nature are, I believe, of considerable value in illustrating an important function of the early theater, I have considered it worth while to point out a few passages which do not seem to be generally known.

The first few months of Elizabeth's reign, a period of extreme uncertainty with respect to the outcome of the Reformation, seem to have been especially productive in controversial entertainments presented to arouse the anti-Catholic feeling. So boisterous, indeed, were histrionic activities as to call forth two royal proclamations in as many months. E. K. Chambers[4] after speaking of the proclamation of May 16, 1559, remarks: "I do not think the proclamation loosely referred to by Holinshed (1587), iii, 1184, as at 'the same time' as another proclamation of 7 April is distinct from this." Miss Gildersleeve (*Government Regulations*, 14) expresses the same opinion. Holinshed, however, is right about the April proclamation. Besides the reference to it by Machyn,[5] there are various others. As these bring out the occasion of the edict they will be cited together with one or two other statements of the time.

On January 23, 1559, Il Schifanoya wrote:[6]

As I suppose your Lordship will have heard of the farce performed in the presence of Her Majesty on the Epiphany, and I not having sufficient

[1] *Mediaeval Stage*, II, 218–23.

[2] *Government Regulation of the Eliz. Drama*, esp. pp. 4–20.

[3] *Shakespeare and His Day*.

[4] *Med. Stage*, II, 225, note.

[5] *Diary* (Camden Soc.), p. 193. Machyn states that on "the viii (*sic*) day of April" there was an elaborate proclamation of peace and "that no players shuld play no more tyll a serten tyme of no mans players; but the mare or shreyff, balle, constabull, or odur offesers take them, lay them in presun, and the quen('s) commondement layd on them." It seems that this April proclamation, however, was concerned with undesirable plays, especially on Sundays and holidays. See below.

[6] *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1558–80, p. 11. With this performance should be compared *Esop's Crowe* in Edward VI's reign "wherein the moste part of the actors were birds" (Collier, *Annals*, I, ed. 1879, p. 152).

intellect to interpret it, nor yet the mumming performed after supper on the same day, of crows in the habits of Cardinals, of asses habited as Bishops, and of wolves representing Abbots, I will consign it to silence, etc.

Writing[1] on February 6 of the same year he says:

There are yet many frivolous and foolish people who daily invent plays in derision of the Catholic faith, of the church, of the clergy, and of the religion; and, by placards posted at the corners of the streets, they invite people to the taverns, to see there representations, taking money from the audience.

On April 11 he wrote:[2]

The peace was subsequently published here, and immediately after the proclamation a stringent order was promulgated, forbidding in future the performance in the hostels and taverns of certain plays and games on holidays, which used to be held in abuse and derision of the Catholic religion, of the Mass, of the Saints, and finally of God; so that some persons say things will yet return to their former state, if not from love at least by force.

On April 22, 1559, Paulo Tiepolo, Venetian ambassador in Spain, wrote to the Doge and Senate:[3]

Letters of the 11th from England announce that the peace has been proclaimed and that on the same day certain plays usually performed daily in the hostels and taverns in derision of the clergy were prohibited.

His letter of May 4 is more detailed:[4]

The demonstrations and performance of plays by the London populace in the hostels and taverns, which as written by me had been prohibited by the Queen, were, according to the account given me by a trustworthy person who has come hither from those parts, so vituperative and abominable that it was marvelous they should so long have been tolerated, for they brought upon the stage all personages whom they wished to revile, however exalted their station, and amongst the rest, in one play, they represented King Philip, the late Queen of England, and Cardinal Pole, reasoning together about such things as they imagined might have been said by them in the matter of religion; so that they did not spare any living person, saying whatever they fancied about them.

The April proclamation, however, did not accomplish its purpose. On April 27, 1559, Feckenham in his speech in Parliament against the Act of Uniformity used the significant words:

[1] *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1558–80, p. 27. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 65. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[4] *Ibid.*, 1558–80, pp. 80–81.

And now, since the coming and reign of our most sovereign and dere lady, Queen Elizabeth, by the only preachers and scaffold-players of this new religion, all things are changed and turned up sett down, notwithstanding the queen's highness proclamations, most godly made to the contrary.[1]

Two days later Count de Feria[2] in describing an interview with Elizabeth wrote to the Spanish king:

She was very emphatic in saying that she wished to punish severely certain persons who had represented some comedies in which Your Majesty was taken off. I passed it by and said that these were matters of less importance than the others although both in jest and earnest more respect ought to be paid to so great a prince as Your Majesty, and I knew that a member of her Council had given the arguments to construct these comedies, which is true, for Cecil gave them, as indeed she partly admitted to me.

This reveals Cecil in a new rôle;[3] and the words of the edict of May 16 that some plays which "have been of late used, are not convenient in any good ordered Christian Common Weale to be suffered" probably assume a more specific significance. Such passages as those cited above aid us in understanding such explanatory prologues as that of *Damon and Pythias;* and they remind us of *New Custom* declaring the "Mass, Popery, Pergatory and Pardons to be flatt against Goddes Woorde" and Henry Cheke's *Freewill* "wherein is set forth in manner of tragedy the devilish device of the Popish religion." And both may be earlier than "cir. 1563" and "cir. 1561," the dates usually assigned (Schelling, *Eliz. Drama,* I, 60). We are reminded, too, of Machyn's statement:

The same day at night [December 31, 1559] at the quen court ther was a play a-for her grace, the wyche the plaers plad shuche matter that they were commadyd to leyff off, and contenent the maske cam in dansyng [*Diary,* 221].

Thompson (*Puritans and the Stage,* 38) is inclined to attribute this move to the "grossness in the dialogue." Considering the date of the performance and the Elizabethan temperament, it is perhaps better to suppose that the Reformers were too bold in instructing Her Majesty in matters religious, and too strong in the denunciation of their opponents. Elizabeth, it must be remembered, never got over

[1] Lord Somer's *Tracts,* I, 84.

[2] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish,* 1558–67, p. 62.

[3] This statement about Cecil causes one to doubt whether the Earl of Derby was merely cultivating the artistic side of the complete gentleman when in June, 1599, he was "busy penning comedies for the common players" (*Cal. State Papers, Domestic,* 1598–1601, p. 227).

a certain fondness for features of the old religion. As Birt has said (*Eliz. Religious Settlement*, 11), her real religious views are extremely hard to determine, yet "it would seem that her leanings were rather to the side of the Catholics, but that self-interest determined her to throw in her lot with those of the New Learning."

Various stories are told of her keeping in her private chapel an altar garnished with tapers, etc., her "honorable sentiments" for the Virgin, Saints, and Cross,[1] and her interrupting the Dean of St. Paul's who was padding his sermon with an abusive digression on images.[2] "Leave that," exclaimed Her Majesty, "it has nothing to do with your subject, and the matter is now threadbare." We can believe that anti-Catholic matter was threadbare in 1565. More interesting is a passage in the letter of August 19, 1564, written by the Spanish ambassador[3] to the Duchess of Parma:

> When the Queen was at Cambridge they represented comedies and held scientific disputations, and an argument on religion, in which the man who defended Catholicism was attacked by those who presided, in order to avoid having to give him the prize. The Queen made a speech praising the acts and exercises, and they wished to give her another representation which she refused in order to be no longer delayed. Those who were so anxious for her to hear it, followed her to her stopping-place, and so importuned her that at last she consented. The actors came in dressed as some of the imprisoned Bishops. First came the Bishop of London carrying a lamb in his hands, as if he were eating it as he walked along, and then others with different devices, one being in the figure of a dog with the Host in his mouth. They write that the Queen was so angry that she at once entered her chamber using strong language, and the men who held the torches, it being night, left them in the dark and so ended the thoughtless and scandalous representation.

This is obviously a description of the exercises of August 9. According to other accounts,[4] after a dispute on the proposition "Major est authoritas scripturae quam ecclesiae," so long that the following debate was much abbreviated and that of the lawyers entirely omitted, the Queen made a Latin oration to the university and retired to her lodging. *Ajax Flagellifer* was ready for presenta-

[1] Dodd, *Church History* (ed. Tierney), II, 149; *Spanish Papers*, 1558–67, pp. 387, 401, etc.

[2] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1558–67, p. 405. Letter of March 12, 1565.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 375.

[4] Nichols, *Progresses of Eliz.*, ed. 1805, I, 20–21, III, 178–79.

tion, but Her Majesty declined to attend, "whether weary with ryding in the forenoone, and disputations after dinner; or whether anie private occasion letted the dooinge thereof, was not commonly knowen." There was, we are told, "great sorrow not only of the players, but of all the whole University" as a result of the Queen's non-appearance. Now if the ambassador's account is to be accepted,[1] and I see no reason for rejecting it, then it would seem that the disputants who had not been allowed to perform in the afternoon insisted on presenting the royal visitor with a very dramatic disputation, a sort of *débat* apparently, with the result that she refused to attend *Ajax Flagellifer*, to the "great sorrow not only of the players but of all the whole University."

Elizabeth, then, was capable of putting a stop to performances too radically anti-Catholic. There is perhaps a better explanation, however, of the objectionable matter in the play mentioned by Machyn. As is well known, one of the burning questions during the first years of the Queen's reign was that of her marriage. At the particular time when the play was interrupted, the agitation on the subject was unusually intense. The Earl of Arran, Archduke Ferdinand, Robert Dudley, and the Prince of Sweden were the chief candidates for attention; and on August[2] 13, 1559, we find the Bishop of Aquila consoling the King of Spain in the following terms: "The King of Sweden's ambassadors who have arrived are being treated by the Queen in a manner that does away with any doubt about her marrying their master, for they are being made fun of in masques in their own presence." A few days later Lord Robert Dudley in a quarrel told the Duke of Norfolk that he was "neither a good Englishman nor a loyal subject who advised the Queen to marry a foreigner."[3] On January 21, 1560, Bishop Quadra wrote[4] that the Queen's marriage with the Earl of Arran "is more talked about than

[1] It should perhaps be noted that Cecil was interested in the Cambridge entertainments, and that two years later when the Queen visited Oxford this same ambassador rode all the way from London partly "to hear what is going on"; and he took the trouble to write to his master that in the "various lectures, disputations, and comedies only ordinary matters have been treated, and nothing has been said about religion, except on the last occasion, when the subject was Theology" (*Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1558–67, p. 578).

[2] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1558–67, p. 91. The letter is dated July, but this is in all probability a mistake for August.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

ever, no doubt because the Archduke's suit is looked upon as at an end." About December 31, 1559, matters must have been pretty warm when Quadra, the advocates of Arran, and the special embassy under the leadership of the Swedish suitor's brother[1] were all at court in the interest of their various champions. Surely we may assume that under such circumstances court politicians would have been tempted to drop gentle hints from the stage and that at such a crucial moment any such attempts would have been promptly silenced.

That the court stage did concern itself with the royal marriage there is, of course, no doubt. We remember in this connection *Gorboduc*, Leicester's postponed *Zabeta*, and the performance at Woodstock which Professor Cunliffe (*Pub. Mod. Lang. Assn.*, XIX) regards as a sort of foil to Gascoigne's production. On July 10, 1564, Guzman de Silva[2] wrote to King Philip:

> After supper she [the Queen] stayed talking to me for some time, and as it was already late I thought it was time to leave her. I was about to take my leave when she told me not to go yet, as she wished me to see a comedy that was to be acted. . . . . The Queen came out to the hall, which was lit with many torches where the comedy was represented. I should not have understood much of it if the Queen had not interpreted, as she told me she would do. *They generally deal with marriage in the comedies.*

After a passage which implies that the comedy being presented dealt with a very specific marriage, he continues:

> The comedy ended, and then there was a masque of certain gentlemen who entered dressed in black and white, which the Queen told me were her colours, and after dancing a while, one of them approached and handed the Queen a sonnet in English, praising her.

On March 12, 1565, after speaking of the tourney and banquet given by Leicester on the 5th, he writes:[3]

> When this was ended we went to the Queen's rooms and descended to where all was prepared for the representation of a comedy in English, of which I understood just so much as the Queen told me. The plot was founded on the question of marriage, discussed between Juno and Diana, Juno advocating marriage and Diana chastity. Jupiter gave a verdict in

[1] The Swedish prince arrived in England on September 27 (Machyn, 213; Hayward, *Annals of Eliz.*, p. 37).

[2] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1558–67, pp. 367–68.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 404–5.

favor of matrimony after many things had passed on both sides in defence of the respective arguments. The Queen turned to me and said, "This is all against me." After the comedy there was a masquerade of satyrs, or wild gods, who danced with the ladies, and when this was finished there entered 10 parties of 12 gentlemen each, the same who had fought in the foot tourney, and these, all armed as they were, danced with the ladies—a very novel ball, surely.

In view of the facts that comedies about marriages were so popular in Elizabethan times, that noblemen were not averse to using the stage for political purposes, and that the Queen was capable of interrupting or refusing to attend undesirable performances, it is perhaps worth while to note that on February 2, 1578/79, a "history" was "provided to have been shewen at Whitehall . . . . by the Earl of Warwick's players" but the Queen "wold not come to hear the same."[1] At this particular time, it must be remembered, there was much agitation[2] regarding the proposed French marriage and the trouble between Casimir and the ambassadors from France, while Warwick was a brother of Leicester, a bitter opponent of the marriage with Alençon. Similarly a "history" was "provided to have been shown" on Innocent's Day, 1579, by Leicester's servants but the Queen "coulde not come forth."[3] At this particular time Leicester was "in disgrace" with Her Majesty as a result of his strenuous opposition to Alençon.[4]

A few references to plays in which royalty was brought upon the stage for political purposes may be of interest. The performance of June, 1522, in which the King of France was represented as an unruly horse is well known through Hall's account (*Chronicle*, 641), but since the description of the Spanish ambassador is much fuller, I feel justified in quoting it as it stands in the Spanish State Papers:

The same day [June 16] the King gave a banquet. . . . . After supper, however, a French play was performed by young gentlemen. It was a farce, and in it the King of France and his alliances were ridiculed. The first actor who came on the stage declared that he was Friendship, who had performed many great and noble deeds in the time of the Romans, and afterwards. After Friendship, Prudence entered, and was received by Friendship with

[1] Feuillerat, *Doc. of Revels*, 303.

[2] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1568–79, pp. 636–44.

[3] *Doc. of Revels*, p. 320.

[4] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1568–79, pp. 692–93, 709.

many demonstrations of joy. Friendship said that he had sought him and that both, if united, could perform very great deeds. They concluded an alliance. Whilst they were doing so, Might entered, and was very well received by Friendship and Prudence, who told him that they wanted no other ally than him, in order to execute their great plans. Friendship was to see that no disunion broke out between them; Prudence would counsel, and Might would carry out the measures. Thus, there was nothing in the world they could not do, and any horse, however wild and unruly he might be, would soon be made to obey them. . . . . A man came on the stage with a great horse, very wild and ferocious. Friendship, Prudence, and Might asked him what he wanted. He answered that that horse belonged to him, but that it was so wild and untamable that he could not make any use of him. Friendship said to the man with the horse that he had come just to the right persons, as they knew best how to manage an unruly horse. If he would confide the horse to them, they would not only subject him, but also make him as tame and obedient as any horse in the world. They made a bridle, and bridled the horse with it. That done, they asked the master of the horse to mount him. At first the master was afraid, but when he mounted the horse he found he was quiet and obedient, although he raised his head very high. Friendship said they would make him lower his head. A curb (Barbada) was attached to the horse, which directly lowered his head. Without being led, the horse followed his master wherever he went.

Thus the farce ended. The meaning of it is clear. The horse is the King of France. . . . . When the comedy was concluded, eight ladies came into the room in fancy dresses and danced the "Pabana" with eight gentlemen whom they chose as partners. After them came eight gentlemen, who were disguised, and who also danced. After the dance came supper, and after supper all went to bed.[1]

Another Spaniard, Iñigo de Mendoça, did not enjoy so much a similar performance at Court on November 10, 1527. The King, he writes, was presented with the Order of St. Michael, and at night entertained the French ambassadors with a great banquet and dancing.

Then came the play (farsa) which represented the King and Cardinal supporting the falling church by their writings against Luther, and also procuring the Pope's liberation. In which play the Spaniards were called *barbarians* and the Emperor a tyrant. The two sons of the King of France were introduced, imploring the help of the King and Cardinal, who agreed to challenge the Emperor, should he not consent to release them. Then the

[1] Martin de Salinas to Treasurer Salamanca, *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1509–25, pp. 444–45.

Emperor's chancellor (Gattinara) came forward to conclude peace, and so the performance ended, the whole argument tending to show that the Emperor was the enemy of England.[1]

Philip II of Spain apparently enjoyed considerable prominence in Elizabethan performances. We have already seen how in 1559 he made his appearance upon the English stage. Of the later dramas of a similar type, Lyly's *Midas* is the most noted example. It was of such plays that Verstegan was thinking when he wrote in 1592 that England's policy was to make "Philip II odious unto the people, and to that end certain players were suffered to scoff and jest at him upon their common stages."[2] Considering the times, it is not surprising to find Hieronomo Lippomano, Venetian ambassador in Spain, writing on July 20, 1586, to the Doge and Senate:[3]

But what has enraged him [Philip II] more than all else, and has caused him to show a resentment such as he has never before displayed in all his life, is the account of the masquerades and comedies which the Queen of England orders to be acted at his expense. His Majesty has received a summary of one of these which was recently represented, in which all sorts of evil is spoken of the Pope, the Catholic religion and the King, who is accused of spending all his time in the Escurial with the monks of S. Jerome, attending only to his buildings, and a hundred other insolences which I refrain from sending to Your Serenity.

The "summary" does not appear to be in the printed Spanish Papers, which are by no means complete. And I doubt seriously the Queen's ordering such performances. A letter of Antonio de Vega written at London on January 9, 1588,[4] is of interest in this connection. After stating that Elizabeth was determined to make peace with the Spanish and mentioning a council meeting which accomplished nothing, he says that

at 11 o'clock at night, after the Queen had heard a comedy, she flew into a passion with the Earl of Leicester, who was present, and told him that it behooved her at any cost to be friendly with the King of Spain. "Because,"

[1] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1527–29, p. 458. For other accounts of this play, see Hall, p. 735, Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey*, I, 136; Chambers, *Med. Stage*, II, 219, etc.

[2] Quoted by R. Simpson, *Trans. New Sh. Soc.*, 1874, 374. His identification of Tamburlaine as Philip II (*ibid.*, 382–83) is, of course, unconvincing. For Spanish plays in general, see Simpson's article, and Schelling, I, 428–29.

[3] *Cal. State Papers, Venetian*, 1581–91, p. 182.

[4] *Cal. State Papers, Spanish*, 1587–1603, p. 191.

she said, "I see that he has great preparations made on all sides. My ships have left to put to sea, and if any evil fortune should befall them, all would be lost, for I shall have lost the walls of my realm."

The patriotic and anti-Spanish tone of the "comedy," I venture to say, was the immediate occasion of this outburst.

Such are some of the references which illustrate a function of the sixteenth-century stage which has not received the treatment that its importance deserves. Passages like those cited above aid one in understanding why Elizabethan court politicians were interested in preserving Elizabethan players and play-houses. They serve to show, too, that all Elizabethan regulations of the stage were not directed against the vagabondish nature of players and their unwillingness to conform to later-day standards of morality. If we appreciate this truth, together with the exaggeration of certain Puritans and the poetry of Shakspere's famous sonnet, we can realize more fully that in the time of Elizabeth there were actors and actors—a fact which Miss Gildersleeve has brought out recently in her book on government regulations of the drama.

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